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BEYOND RATIONAL ACTION:
WEBERIAN THEORY AND POLICY ISSUES IN AIDS

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Abstract

This paper examines the contribution of sociological research to the resolution of the AIDS issue in Canada. Particularly, the debate over individual's rights and protection of public health is examined in terms of Max Weber's typology of action and his theory of rationalization. Public policies based on purposive rational action provide effective and efficient solutions to the AIDS crisis, but they may threaten the integrity of the existing social system. Policies based on value rational action, on the other hand, preserve and protect basic values of human freedom, equality and decency in the treatment of all individuals in the society. In a democratic society, policymakers cannot afford to ignore these fundamental values which have been entrenched in the constitutional framework of social organization.

BEYOND RATIONAL ACTION: WEBERIAN THEORY AND POLICY ISSUES IN AIDS

It is generally believed by the public and by social scientists themselves that AIDS is a serious social problem. Yet, in contrast to the mass media, where the issues on AIDS have often been discussed to catch the attention of public, scholarly writings on AIDS are markedly absent in major social scientific journals. Because the majority of AIDS patients are homosexuals, for many, AIDS is primarily a problem of homosexuals even though the disease seems to be spreading rapidly among heterosexuals and drug abusers.

The homophobia attached to AIDS makes it less attractive for social scientists to become involved in research on AIDS. Compared to the deluge of research and publications on such topics as aging, health care professions and medical technology, not to mention the mass of publications in sociology of deviance, social scientists seem to be less interested in examining issues on AIDS which pertain to social scientific discourse. The disease itself appeared in a time that the conservative thinking of the moral majority in North America had begun to regain popular support. Particularly in the United States, the early 1980s were marked by an upsurge of conservative moral philosophy after the Reagan administration came to power. Hence, AIDS soon became an important moral issue concerning human sexuality in addition to a public health issue. Social scientists could not resist the influence of the dominant values of the social system, but submitted to them by largely ignoring the problem. Therefore, the idea of value-free social science appears once again to be an expectation that social scientists are not able to meet.

Until now the mobilization of science has been undertaken by epidemiological and biomedical researchers while the potential

contribution of the social sciences in coping with the AIDS epidemic remains relatively unnoticed (Ergas, 1987). The epidemiological nature of AIDS -- that is the relationship between the transmission of the virus and a particular type of behaviour -- has been recognized as being of paramount importance. While AIDS is spreading at an alarming rate, the scientific community continues to insist that neither vaccine nor satisfactory drugs for AIDS will be available in the near future. Therefore, the message is quite clear: the control of the spread of AIDS at present is only possible through effective social measures. In this context, the role of social science has been specifically emphasized by the National Academy of Science (1986, p. 27) in the United States: "Social science research can help develop effective education programs ... (that) contribute to the design of policies that reduce the public's fear of AIDS and that help eliminate discriminatory practice toward AIDS patients. And it can shape the establishment of health care and social services for AIDS patients".

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the contribution of sociological research to the resolution of the AIDS issue in Canada. Max Weber's typology of action and his theory of rationalization conceptualize unique characteristics of modern Western societies. They provide important guidelines to examine critical social issues, like AIDS. The debate over individual's rights and protection of public health has been in the forefront of policy discussions during the past few years. This paper examines this issue in terms of Weber's typology of action and his theory of rationalization. Further, the relevance of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms to public policies on AIDS is discussed in an attempt to demonstrate how the competing ideals -- that is the protection

of individual's rights and the protection of public health -- can be accommodated in public policies without sacrificing one for the sake of the other. Finally, a number of propositions and hypotheses derived from Weberian theory with regard to AIDS are discussed in order to pin down a series of issues that need to be addressed in empirical research.

Theory: The Process of Rationalization

Max Weber's interpretation of rationalization has been recognized as his major contribution to comparative sociology. Many sociologists believe that rationality is the major theme defined by Weber, both as a methodological criterion and as the substantive sociological problem of his empirical research. As a methodological criterion, for example, Weber constructed a typology of action in which rational social action is the principal ideal type. Weber argued that such an ideal typical model is only a methodological device against which all social actions can be measured.

Weber's typology of action (1947, p. 115) -- that is, affectual or emotional, traditional, value rational and purposive rational actions -- is a universal model in which all types of social actions are encountered. Weber argued that the majority of everyday actions to which people have become habitually accustomed are either traditionally or emotionally oriented actions, but that neither type of action is based on consciously considered objectives. Hence, for Weber both traditional and affectual types of action were unimportant because the meaning of such actions is unpredictable and uncertain. He was more interested in rational types of social action and their consequences for social organization.

In the case of value rational action, according to Weber, the choice of means is determined by the desire to adhere to certain value systems. Therefore, it differs from both affectual and traditional types of action because of its clear, conscious formulation of ultimate values. In this type of action the individual disregards the possible cost to himself and fulfills the task as an honour. As Weber (1947, pp. 115-117) described it "regardless of possible cost to themselves" individuals are involved in value rational actions as a "practice of their convictions required by duty, honour, the pursuit of beauty, a religious call, personal loyalty, or importance of some cause no matter in what it consists". Further, Weber argued "when action is oriented to absolute values, it always involves 'commands' or 'demands' to the fulfillment of which the actor feels obligated". Therefore, value rational action is intended to perpetuate a certain kind of value system regardless of the personal discomfort associated with such actions.

In contrast to value rational action, purposive rational action is based on a purely rational choice among possible means to obtain certain defined goals. Hence, purpose and all secondary consequences are taken into account rationally. The most viable and rational choice of action is decided by considering all possible means to an end. The essence of purposive rational action is, therefore, that one chooses the means methodically and rationally in view of a specific goal that the goal itself may be irrational is unimportant. Insofar as the selected means are appropriate to attaining a particular goal, such actions are regarded as rational. Therefore, from the point of view of purposive rational action, according to Weber, the selection of means to any given end is absolutely free from all social and cultural values.

The domination of purposive rational action in modern Western societies was foreseen by Weber. He argued that a "disenchantment of the world" has taken place in the West more than anywhere else. Virtually all spheres of Western culture and social organization have undergone the process of rationalization, so that in principle there are no mysterious, unknowable powers, and that humans can master everything through technical and practical means (1958, pp. 129-156). Weber realized, however, that the process of rationalization has an adverse effect on social values. It has eliminated the sense of duty based on values. The future of these societies, according to Weber, is moving toward an inescapable danger (iron cage) from which they can never be rescued: the impossibility of preserving social values in the face of scientific rationalization.

Although the domination of rational orientation in modern Western societies was foreseen by Weber, his failure to articulate the process of rationalization with his analysis of social classes, status groups and parties in modern societies left the impression that rationalization was a unilinear process in the West. The extent and the direction of rationalization among different social groups, however, implies that the process of rationalization is by no means a unilinear development. Further, it is implicit in Weber's own analysis of classes, status groups and parties that the diversity of action orientation can exist even within a particular party or a status group itself, and that the action of party leadership may not always represent the action orientation of party members. For example, according to Weber (1947, pp. 407-412), members of the same party may not adhere to the same action which is prescribed by the leadership. They may possess a value rational or purposive rational action incompatible with that of their leadership; they may "act in the

interests of a status group or a class or of certain objective policies or abstract principles".

Hence, Weber's analysis of rationalization in modern Western societies is incomplete because he did not take into account the internal diversity of rational orientation among various status groups and social classes, and even among individuals within a group. Therefore, the methodological significance of Weber's concept of rationalization and his typology of action is limited, unless these concepts are extended to reflect the diversity of action orientation among different groups and individuals with respect to various issues. Further, Weber's typology of action, from the point of view of policy makers, can be more useful if it is employed to examine the diversity of opinions and action orientations among social groups and individuals. For example, future policy will have to deal with problems of potentially enormous costs of treating and maintaining AIDS victims, and when large sums of money are required, policy issues become very sharply debated. It will become important for policy makers to know what various constituencies think and how they are oriented toward the problem of resolving the conflict between preservation of society and preservation of values. While Weber's theory implies diversity of orientation among various constituencies, the exact nature of this diversity in terms of value-rational and purposive-rational action is an empirical issue. The relationship between these two types of action and public policy is a subject to which we now turn our attention.

Individual Vs. Society

In the formulation of public policy, policymakers may follow two pathways. In the first, they must be responsive to important pressure

groups in the society, and policies which are adopted on this pathway will reflect the interests of those groups. The second pathway leads to policies designed to alter, rather than reflect, public perceptions. It is important to note the two pathways may intersect. That is, policies adopted in response to pressure or interest groups may appear to have the near-term consequence of achieving goals important to those groups, but in the long-term may result in eroding social values which define the unique nature of the social system itself. For instance, Weber's theory clearly suggests that purposive rational action will encourage public policies which provide effective and efficient solutions to problems, but they may threaten the integrity of the existing social system; value-rational action, on the other hand, encourages policies which preserve and protect basic values of human freedom, equality and decency in the treatment of all individuals in the society. Policies which are designed to respond to pressure groups and are less concerned with social integration may tend to shortchange these basic human rights in favor of protection of the status quo, particularly if the issue of human rights is raised on behalf of relatively powerless and low-status groups. For this reason, policymakers cannot afford to ignore the ultimate utility of value-rational action, even at the expense of offending certain groups which appear to be crucial to the survival of these policymakers themselves.

The protection of society (i.e. purposive rational orientation) and the protection of individual's rights and freedoms (i.e. value rational orientation) are often incompatible objectives. Therefore, effective public policies dealing with AIDS may infringe on the fundamental principles of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. The protection of society from a fatal disease is unquestionably a number one

priority of all responsible institutions of the state. Yet, it does not permit anyone to override fundamental social values such as individual rights and freedoms in a democratic society. Particularly when such values are embedded in the constitutional framework of social organization, any attempt to undermine such values could result in serious social upheavals. Therefore, in these circumstances finding solutions to problems are not easy, and conflicting objectives can be accomplished only through compromise. Hence, this particular understanding is essential for making viable public policies to deal with the AIDS crisis.

The ethos of public health considers the well-being of the community as its highest good, but limits individual freedom and privacy, to an extent, in order to prevent morbidity from taking its toll. Thus, from this point of view it is irrational even to compare the civil liberties of fatally ill individuals with the benefits of the good health of others. Therefore, proponents of strong measures to control the spread of AIDS insist the public intervention to limit social cost is a matter of the highest priority. The existing public health policies in both the United States and Canada are based on this type of rational philosophy which emphasizes the importance of protecting public health even though an individual's rights to privacy and freedom may be limited. For example, the Lalonde Report of Canada (A New Perspective on the Health of Canadians, 1974) and Healthy People (U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare, 1979) have argued that many private acts have serious social consequences and, therefore, public intervention to control them is absolutely inevitable.

On the other hand, those who oppose all strict measures to control the AIDS epidemic argue that while the protection of society from a fatal

disease is important, such action should not violate the basic human rights of those who are already affected by the disease (Brandt, 1985). Therefore, any action to control the spread of the disease must take into account the individual's right to privacy, work, receipt of public services and freedom of movement, all of which would be in danger if society adopted those strict measures proposed by public health advocates. In general, they oppose any discriminatory treatment against those with AIDS or those who carry the HIV virus. Since the freedom of the individual is viewed as the highest good of a liberal society from the point of view of civil libertarians, measures to protect the public health should not disregard human rights, equality or the quality and value of human life. The least restrictive alternative is the best standard against which any course of action must be measured.

Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms

Introduction of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms in 1982 was an important legislative guarantee of individual's rights and freedoms. The section 15 of the Charter, which explains Equality Rights, is particularly relevant to public policies on AIDS. It argues that "every individual is equal before and under the law and has right to the equal protection and, in particular, without discrimination based on race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, sex, age or mental or physical disability". This means that the Charter prohibits discrimination against any individual on the basis of the above characteristics. Although these are not the only grounds on which discrimination is not allowed by the Charter, this gives courts the power to include other grounds on which discrimination is disallowed. This

flexibility permits courts to adapt the Constitution to society's changing needs. For example, section 15 of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms does not specifically mention sexual orientation, that is homosexual and heterosexual individuals, but the section prohibits discrimination in general and, therefore, courts can prohibit any discriminatory actions against certain individuals on the grounds of sexual orientation.

The protection of public health from the AIDS epidemic without violating the Charter of Rights is an important issue that has not been addressed properly. Although AIDS is an incurable and fatal disease, it is not easily transmissible. All evidence available so far indicate that AIDS is spread through direct blood to blood or semen to blood contact. There is no evidence that AIDS can be transmitted through air, water, food or casual body contact. Unlike most transmissible disease - colds, flu, measles, etc., AIDS is not transmitted through sneezing, coughing, eating or drinking from common utensils or merely being around an infected person. "After six years of experience it is evident that casual contact with AIDS patients does not place others at risk. No cases have been found where AIDS has been transmitted through casual contact with a household member, relative, co-worker or friend" (Long, 1987, p. 27).

Therefore on the basis of this knowledge, it is not necessary to isolate or quarantine people infected with the virus in order to protect public health. Only certain types of behaviour, such as sexual contacts involving blood-to-blood or semen-to-blood, or sharing needles with those who are infected with the virus, are regarded as high risk activities, and all the other normal social relations do not cause any risk to public health. Therefore, individuals with AIDS have the right to engage in

employment along with others, and to live freely anywhere they like as there is no evidence that being around someone with AIDS, even for an extended period of time, puts another person at risk for AIDS. Hence, any action which limits these basic rights and freedoms of individual clearly violates the Charter.

It is clear from the preceding discussion that, on the one hand, proponents of purposive rational action argue that the protection of public health is a matter of the highest priority; on the other hand, proponents of value rational action argue that measures designed to control the spread of the disease should not infringe on the basic rights and the quality of life of those who are already infected with the virus. Both groups are attempting to accomplish conflicting objectives without compromising their ideals.

The bifurcation of public opinion along these two opposing ideals -- that is the protection of the rights of individual and the protection of public health -- has far reaching implications for public health policies. The exercise of state power to implement compulsory public health policies for the well being of the community can certainly ignore the civil liberty and privacy of a small group of individuals who have already become victims of the epidemic. But the issue of civil liberty goes far beyond AIDS and entails the entire society, as indicated by the fact the issue has been taken up by many civil rights activist groups which are not primarily concerned with the civil liberty of AIDS patients (see Musto, 1986; Gostin, 1986; Brandt, 1985). They believe that AIDS may occasion new and coercive measures for the "policing of society". As David Musto (1986, p. 108) argues, "quarantine is a response not only to the actual mode of transmission, but also to a popular demand to establish a boundary

between the kind of person so diseased and the respectable people who hope to remain healthy". Therefore, their concern is not only the inadequacy of the attention given by public health officials and legislatures to the rights of those victims of AIDS, but the extent to which the state can effectively restraint the civil liberty of its citizens in a democratic society.

Agenda for Research

As we have pointed out, public policy in a democratic society may be responsive to influences of various pressure groups, such as class, status and power groups. Therefore, it is theoretically and practically fruitful to consider the intersection of two aspects of Weberian theory: his conceptualization of types of action which characterize social systems, and his conceptualization of the diverse bases for ordering groups within social systems. A research agenda based on this model may address itself to several questions which result from this juxtaposition. For instance:

PROPOSITION #1: Weber's perceived transcendence of purposive rationality in modern Western societies cannot be regarded as monolithic. There are suggestions in his theory that various groups in society will tend to be overtaken by purposive rationality at different rates. According to Weber (1958, p. 256), for example, variations in purposive rational orientation among groups arise from differences in the relative sophistication of the means available to master daily problems in their lives. As a result of their typical activities, Weber argues, all civic strata, in particular -- merchants, artisans, traders -- show a definite tendency to order their actions in terms of purposive rational manner. Similarly, civil servants

adopt a purposive rational orientation as a result of their typical daily activities in organizational settings. In contrast, according to Weber (1958, p. 144), the professional ethics of medical practitioners seem to be based on value rationality; it is a fundamental presupposition of the medical profession to maintain life and to eliminate suffering: "the medical person", Weber argues, "preserves the life of mortally ill man ..., even if his relatives, to whom his life is worthless and to whom the cost of maintaining his worthless life grow unbearable, grant his redemption from suffering". This commitment of medical profession is consistent with the type of action that Weber described as value rational.

PROPOSITION #2: Weber's theory also suggests that purposive rationality and value rationality are ends of a continuum, and that action which can be observed in a social system is actually always composed of elements of both. Thus, it is possible that values can themselves be preserved through actions which are predominantly purposive rational. For example, as a result of the development of modern institutional structures such as jurisprudence and parliamentary democracy, which have been described by Weber as an outcome of the process of rationalization, certain fundamental values are now institutionalized. Freedom of speech, freedom to practice one's religious beliefs etc., have been entrenched in national constitutions. As the Canadian Charter of Rights and the American Bill of Rights have demonstrated, purposive rational action itself can become the guardian of values. In other words, the process of rationalization, as Weber described it, can make its own limits beyond which it cannot perform -- that is the place of values.

PROPOSITION #3: Weber identified three basic means by which groups within society can be defined: class, status and party. These are important ways in which society is ordered. For example, class, according to Weber (1978, p. 302), means all persons in the same class situation (persons having similar economic interests). However, Weber suggests that the unity of a social class is highly variable. Even if the class situation and other circumstances remain the same, an individual is likely to pursue his/her own interest which may differ considerably from that of others. In contrast to class, status groups are normally communities with unique characteristics. A status group is, in Weber's view, a group of individuals in the same situation (persons having similar style of life). For example, both propertied and propertyless people can belong to the same status group even though in the long run this equality of social esteem may become rather precarious. Therefore a status group, according to Weber, reflects a "plurality of persons" in a large community. Party, in contrast to both class and status groups, encompasses a much larger aggregation of individuals representing interests determined through both class situations as well as status situations. In this respect, Weber (1958, p. 194) points out, the sociological structure of a party in modern societies represents relatively unstable and diverse substratums. Party members are less likely to agree with party leaders on a particular issue (e.g. M.P.s of all three major political parties in Canada had different opinions from those of their leaders about three major social issues in 1988: capital punishment, the Meech Lake accord and abortion). They are more likely to pursue the interest of their constituencies or specific interest groups operating within the party.

Those who are in positions of determining policy, if they are to be effective, have to be sensitive to the diversity represented in the social system, as indicated by the presence of these different ordering criteria. Weber's theory is incomplete in that it does not suggest how these various groups differ in terms of predominance of value or purposive rationality. It is thus an empirical question; however, the answers have important implications for policy. Some suggestions regarding how these groups might differ in their action orientation can be stated as hypotheses.

HYPOTHESIS #1: Religious status groups might be expected to emphasize value rational action more than, say, merchants, artisans and traders (commercial class). That is, religion is a social institution charged with maintaining and interpreting traditional values. In this sense, according to Weber (1963, pp. 208-210), religion has helped to promote social obligations by providing values that serve to channel the attitudes of society's members and to define for them the content of their social obligations. Economic institutions are those charged with furthering practical ends of society. Thus, individuals associated with economic activities might be expected to emphasize purposive rational actions -- that is effective and efficient solutions to the problem. Further, however, there might be expected to be differences in action orientations within these different groups. For instance, there may well be differences among occupational groupings. Are those who can be classified as "economic elite" likely to have differing views on social issues than those who are in the working class? What about differences between professionals and civil servants? Are there differences of opinions among ethnic groups? With regard to religious status groups: are there likely

to be differences between fundamentalist groups and more liberal religious organizations?

HYPOTHESIS #2: Political parties on the right, and political parties on the left are likely to view issues such as resolution of the AIDS problem differently. Weber's (1978, pp. 984-985) discussion on party orientations gives some ideas about how the major political parties would respond to critical social issues. He argues that "personal relationships" and "personal esteem" are central to the power basis of conservatives and liberals, whereas the "democratic mass parties" (Weber's term) tend to break away from such personal attachments. The democratic mass parties are more likely to form the direction of party policies "by means of public opinion". Conservatives and liberals, for instance, with their tendency toward supporting traditional political structures and values, might favour solutions which emphasize retention of values more than solutions which emphasize solutions. Those on the left, on the other hand, may have more orientation toward efficient solutions even if it means altering traditional values somewhat. However, the composition of opinions across parties and within the party may vary remarkably depending upon the position taken by various influential party supporters.

HYPOTHESIS #3: Despite the tendency to cleave society over the AIDS issue, there is a counter-tendency, according to Weber, for individuals to experience a series of cross-cutting loyalties which will tend to balance and integrate society over any particular issue. For instance, each individual will simultaneously belong to economic, status and party groups: a person will be an executive of a corporation, let's say, and at

the same time s/he is also a member of a fundamentalist religious order, and also a member of the conservative political party. Each individual in society has a particular melange of associations, and all of these associations are not necessarily going to view issues in the same way. Further, the classification of mode of action orientations, suggested by this discussion, by no means precludes the possibilities of having marginal groups without clear-cut opinion on any particular issue. The classification of action, as Weber himself insisted, is only a conceptual form against which actual action patterns can be examined. The usefulness of this classification for the purpose of empirical investigations can only be judged in terms of its results.

Conclusion

The relevance of social research for public policy is not merely a practical question, it is a theoretical question as well. The relationship between social policy research and social action, as delineated by the value-free model of social science, is an enduring theoretical question in the social scientific disciplines. Thus, sociologists, particularly medical sociologists, must begin to view "social issues" as "sociological issues" -- that is, issues which have enduring, rather than passing, relevance. By selecting or ignoring social issues on the basis of their popularity and by examining them without making reference to theory, social science research cannot realize its potential impact on public policy. The multi-dimensional nature of social problems is revealed in the sociological issue itself. Political, moral, ethical and economic implications of any specific social problem are thus assured equal consideration when research is generated by primary attention to these issues.

Sociologists, like everyone else, take part in everyday issues and make judgments. But sociology, as a discipline, is expected to be value free -- that is, sociologists must strive to avoid their own personal judgments while engaging in the sociological enterprise. Weber (1949, p. 72) in his methodological writings addresses himself primarily to this question, and he concluded that truth in the case of social sciences is a matter of establishing empirical grounds of "adequate causation" for the occurrence of particular events and phenomena. The work of great figures in Sociology - Marx, Durkheim and Weber - retains significance through time because they addressed themselves primarily to sociological issues. But they did not stop with analysis of those issues. Rather, they demonstrated the practical relevance of such work to pressing social issues, in which they took an active role. Weber, Marx, and Durkheim all had their own personal opinions on various social issues; their writings are full of references to moral, religious, political and economic problems that were in the forefront of intellectual concerns of that time. Weber repeatedly spoke of a need for 'political education' as a means of achieving political maturity necessary to face Germany's immediate political challenges. Durkheim actively worked for moral reforms and social justice as he provided the Third Republic in France with a non-clerical morality. Similarly, Marx believed it necessary to organize workers behind a revolutionary party in an attempt to mobilize the working class struggle toward a political end.

Because of the lack of understanding of the exact meaning of the idea of value free social science and the immense desire to make sociology more like natural science most sociologists today seem to believe that sociological discourse must separate from moral or political concerns. As

Mark Wardell and Stephen Turner (1986, p. 12) argued, the vast majority of contemporary sociological activity contributes very little to constructing social theories having an integrated stance toward society, a major purpose of classical sociology. Contemporary sociological research carefully avoids making any reference to morally or politically sensitive issues because sociologists think such issues are irrelevant or inappropriate for social scientific discourse. As a result, the impact of social science research on public policies have tremendously declined during the last few decades. This tendency is quite evident in the United States where social science research and training focusing on social problems have been singled out for "special treatment" resulting in dramatic cutbacks in funding (American Sociological Association, 1981, 9/3, p. 1, 9/4, p. 1, 9/8, p. 7; 1982, 10/5, p. 1). The reason for such a special treatment, according to Miller (1982, p. 4) is "the assessment of nonapplicability of much social research".

The issue of AIDS in society clearly presents a challenge to social scientists. One cannot deny its momentous importance as a social issue. This paper has attempted to demonstrate that this issue, like many others, can be fruitfully identified as a manifestation of an ongoing sociological issue, clearly central to the theoretical concerns of at least one classical theorist, Max Weber. The theoretical issue is the predicted erosion of values in modern Western societies as a result of the growing dominance of purposive rational action.

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